Brian rolled over on the sofa and shoved his head in the crack between the seat and back rest cushions. The rough, brown fabric scuffed his cheeks, but this half-ass attempt at self-burial didn't stop the phone from ringing. It continued - a jarring, alarming sound that caused pain.

Brian extracted his face and lay flat on his back. He was a little too tall to fit perfectly on the three-seater, so his feet were propped up over the arm rest. He had to blink a few times to see them clearly, all the way down there....

Four more wailing cries from the telephone and Brian swung those feet around, cursed, and stood up shakily. He padded to the kitchen, kicking a beer can from his path, and snatched the receiver from the unit mounted on the wall.

"Brian," a weak voice said. "Brian?"

Rain started pattering against the roof and the windows. In the distance, thunder.

"Brian?" the voice asked again. "Please, Brian...." On that last, the voice broke and began to sob. Brian fell back against the wall and slid down until he was seated on the floor. The phone cord stretched taut.

"Julie," Brian croaked, then cleared his throat and tried again. "Julie." Better, stronger this time. "Why did you call?"

"Oh, Brian." Julie sniffled. Brian could imagine her standing outside some rinky-dink convenience store, wiping her face while talking on the payphone. Customers trying not to look at her as they walked by; thinking she's damaged goods running from, or to, trouble.

They'd be right.

"I'm hanging up," Brian said, but didn't move.

"No!" Julie cried. "No, please."

"Well why did you call?"

The line cracked with static then Brian heard thunder again. He put the phone away from his ear and listened - it wasn't coming from outside; he only heard the rain falling. Was Julie close enough to be in the same storm?

"Where are you?" he asked.

"I want to come home," she said softly.

Brian laughed. A bitter, hacking sound. "I can't help but think about all those people in hell. They want ice water too, I'm told."

Static or maybe crying. Brian shook his head.

"Look, Julie. Are you still in Oklahoma? Well, just.... Stay there. Find something. There's nothing - believe me - there's nothing for you here."

"No, Brian, please."

"Don't fucking!" Brian checked himself. With more control, he said, "Don't you dare *please* me." When he heard the words aloud, he felt even more stupid. "You did this," he continued. "All you. So don't.... Just don't. And stop crying. It won't work this time."

"...home..." Julie whispered.

"Not anymore," Brian answered.

Thunder on the line, loud enough to startle Brian. On her end, even the rain was letting up outside.

He sat on the cold kitchen floor. The only light in the house came through the windows - grey and wet, making everything around him look unreal; like shadows.

"Keep the car," Brian said with a cold, matter-of-fact voice. "I don't even care about that. I did cancel the credit card, though, so...,"

"His wife was there. And his daughter. I thought...,"

Brian cradled the phone to his shoulder and blew wind at the ceiling. He didn't want to hear this. He'd heard it before. Her ex-boyfriend, Virgil in Oklahoma, needed her - no, really really needed her. Oh, she didn't love Virgil, not anymore, not like that, but she couldn't just let him.... what? What, this time? Go to jail? Get beat up? Get killed? Always something ridiculously dramatic.

The first time it had happened almost was, should have been, what the hell had he

been thinking? the last. Brian had raged furiously at Julie for even considering going to help that low life. Looking back, he couldn't recall exactly how she got it over on him. Lots of empty promises and hollow words of love and devotion, he supposed. Also, she was very beautiful and warm.

And he loved her. HAD loved her.

No more, though. There's only so much a man can take. Yesterday when she took the car, forged his name to withdraw money from his bank account, and emptied the emergency cash from his hiding place in the closet.... He could just see her, dragging a chair down the hall so she could reach it. Hell, she probably had to stack some books on the chair to give her enough lift. Then scrambling around the hidden panel, desperately trying to gain a finger-hold before toppling off her perch.

Done. He was done with her. This time for good.

When he brought the phone back to his ear, she was still talking, "...some terrible things. Oh, Brian, I'm so sorry. I never-"

"-Julie," Brian cut her off. "I'm hanging up now. No, don't say anything else. Don't come here, don't call again. Do us all a favor and stay in Oklahoma."

Brian pushed himself off the floor. He could hear her pleading voice, along with crackling static and some loud thunderclaps before he set the receiver back on its hook, disconnecting the line. He stood there for a while, hand on the phone, head hung low.

After waiting a full five minutes for her to call back, he sighed and turned towards the refrigerator. He grabbed two beers and shuffled back to the couch.

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Brian was just about to crack the top of the second beer when the doorbell rang, immediately followed by a trio of knocks.

Fuzzy from the drinking binge he'd been on, Brian stood up too fast, swooned, caught himself then chuckled. "Who's there?" he called out in a singsong, drunken voice.

"Police," came the response.

And just like that, twenty-five hours of drinking fell away, and Brian became

instantly, magically sober.

He opened the door to find a sharply dressed, clean-cut officer of the law on his front step. But something was wrong. This policeman did not have the typical officious, slightly pissed off appearance they used when dealing with the public. Indeed, if anything, the man on his porch looked timid. Maybe even sad, with a few tear-like drops of rainwater falling from the brim of his hat.

"Brian Muncie?" the officer asked.

"Yes?"

"May I come in?"

Brian stood aside, door opened. He turned on some lights. He normally kept a clean house, so one day of pitiful indulgence hadn't turned it upside-down, but there were enough empties around to make him feel uneasy. Judged.

"May I?" the officer indicated the padded chair that was part of the living room set. Brian nodded. He sat on the adjoining couch.

"Mr. Muncie, we received a call from the Oklahoma City police department this morning. It turns out your car was involved in a fatal traffic accident last night on Highway 35."

"I don't.... I don't have the car."

"I understand, sir. Apparently, it was being driven by a Ms. Julie Nickerson?"

"Yes. She took it. What...?"

"I hate to be the one to tell you this, but Ms. Nickerson is dead."

Wait.... Last night? But he just hung up on her not fifteen minutes ago.

"Apparently, she lost control, flipped the car.... Mr. Mucnie, are you okay?"

"No, this isn't right. She was still alive this morning. I was talking to her just now, before you came."

The policeman cleared his throat. "I'm very sorry. The body was identified by her

driver's license and there was a Mister...," he checked his notes, "Virgil Templeton who also provided a positive ID."

The officer stood up and took a business card from his shirt pocket. "Here's the number for the Oklahoma Police. You can contact them for further information, and about the car. Again, I'm very sorry Mr. Muncie."

Brian reflexively took the card as it was offered but didn't even see it. "Last night?"

"Yes sir. Pronounced dead at the scene, around eleven o' clock." The policeman moved to the door. "We didn't know it was your car until we spoke to Mr. Templeton who suggested.... Well, he said it might be yours."

"This is... not right."

"Call the number, Mr. Muncie, when you feel better. They'll need to know how you want to dispose of the car." The officer stood dumbly at the door, not wanting to leave on those words, but finding nothing else. He nodded and then left.

The card slipped from Brian's hand.